

## D O N A      Z E F I N H A

Upper class Brazilian women are traditionally of the clinging vine type. They are brought up in the old Iberian fashion, protected first by their fathers and brothers, afterwards by their husbands, and finally by their sons, so that they seldom feel the need of physical or moral courage to meet difficult situations. Of course in the modern day all standards are changing; but in the good old days it was so. However, there were notable exceptions.

Dona Zefinha — her name was Josefa, but the diminutive had been used until it came to supplant the original name, and be considered her real name — lived on a plantation far in the interior of Pernambuco, where in those days the Colt and the peixeira (a kind of broad bladed knife) were the principal means of maintaining law and order. Left a widow at an early age, she was forced to develop resourcefulness in order to cope with the lawless elements of the region. Many stories are told of her courage and indomitable spirit.

On one occasion, it is said, there was a dance to be held in the town about twelve miles from her home. Although she had some cotton which it was imperative to get shipped (by ox wagon) the following morning, D. Zefinha, who had not lost all the social graces, resolved to go to the dance and stay until about midnight, then sleep three or four hours at the home of a friend, and start for the farm before daylight, in order to get the cotton shipped without delay.

The party went merrily enough, until D. Zefinha looked at her watch, and saw that it said five minutes of three. Really it was only a little after eleven, and the watch had stopped in the afternoon; but one can easily lose consciousness of the passage of time on such occasions, and she did not think of doubting the watch. There was now no time left for sleep if she expected to arrive at home in time; therefore she left the dance without mentioning to anyone what she was doing, went to the friend's house, changed into man's clothes, to avoid being accosted if she met anyone, stuck a pistol into her pocket for additional safety, saddled

her horse, and set out. She said nothing to her friend, not wishing to disturb her at such an hour.

The night was dark, but the road was of course perfectly familiar, and she anticipated no trouble. All went well indeed until she reached her uncle's farm, which adjoined her own; though it did seem strange that after riding nearly two hours the sky had not even begun to lighten toward dawn. Her uncle had a store, which stood on the road, about two hundred yards from his house. Just as she reached this store, two men sprang out of the darkness, one seizing the horse's bridle, the other the stirrup, before she could make a move to escape. She drew her pistol from her pocket, and held it tightly against her, determined to use it only as a last resort. Shooting in the dark is uncertain at best, and against two men armed with knives a pistol is no great advantage.

"Boa noite," the man in front said. She made no answer, not wishing her voice to betray her. If they came to know that she was a woman, her case would be desperate indeed.

"Boa noite," the man repeated. "Good night. Can't you speak?"

"Boa noite," she replied, trying to make her voice as gruff as possible. But the men saw through the deception immediately.

"It's a woman," cried the man in front. "Pull her down!" The other man seized her leg, trying to pull her from the horse. She fired, and he fell. She spurred the horse, and the horse, partly from the spur and partly from the shot, bolted so suddenly that the man in front was thrown from his feet and trampled, and D. Zefinha galloped in safety to her uncle's house, where the household was soon aroused. The two men had been in the act of breaking into her uncle's store when she had come along, and they had seized her, intending to kill the intruder unless it should prove to be some friend of theirs.

D. Zefinha was once a guest in a home when all the men and older boys rode out at night for a tatú (armadillo) hunt, leaving only the women and small children in the house. Some evil men, knowing of the projected hunt, resolved to take advantage of the defenseless group of women and children, and plunder and terrorize the place.

The first intimation the women had of the situation was a knock at the door, with a demand for admittance. On being questioned, the men gave no satisfactory explanation of their presence, but reiterated the demand that they be admitted. A knocking on the shutters at the rear at the same time made clear to them that their assailants were numerous, and that violence was intended.

The women now began to scream, and run aimlessly to and fro -- all but D. Zefinha. She sought to calm the hysterical women, and to organize some sort of plan of defense. There were few weapons in the house, and most of the women were totally ignorant of their use, and too much excited to use them, had they known how. The doors and windows were barred, but might be forced. Unable to get any cooperation from the women, D. Zefinha called a small boy, and handing him a peixeira, stationed him at the front door, instructing him, in a whisper, to use the knife on any fingers that might appear through the crack at the bottom of the door. The boy took his station eagerly, and when a few minutes later he heard a robber outside the door and felt that his moment was near he shouted to one of his fellows, "Just watch me cut off some fingers as soon as they come through the crack!" The robber, warned just in time, withdrew his fingers, but when another robber who had not heard the warning sought to try the same attack the boy, with a shout of glee, raised the peixeira over his head in preparation for a mighty blow -- and the point of it split the scalp of a woman standing just behind him.

At this pandemonium broke loose, as the wound <sup>though superficial,</sup> bled freely, and everyone, especially the woman herself, thought that a mortal wound had been inflicted; and D. Zefinha, seeing that there was no hope of cooperation from the hysterical occupants, seized a shotgun, and quietly let herself out through a window in a dark room at the rear, hoping to take the robbers from behind as they sought to force the front door. Coming around the house, she discharged her weapon at the group, wounding one of the robbers; but another robber, at the shot, turned and fired his pistol at her, point blank. Now it so happened that unknown to D. Zefinha the leader of the band of robbers had seen her emerge from the house, and was coming up behind her, ready at that very moment to lay hands on her; and when, at the motion of the pistol, she

involuntarily ducked, the ball passed just above her head, killing instantly the chief of the robbers, who stood just behind her. At this the other robbers took fright and fled; and calm gradually returned to the troubled household. But the courage and resourcefulness of D. Zefinha will long be remembered in that land, where personal courage is considered one of the greatest of the virtues.